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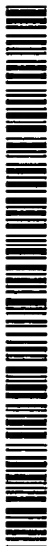


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(54) Title: METHOD FOR HIGH YIELD RETICLE FORMATION

(57) Abstract: A system and method for optimizing the production of lithography reticles involves identifying "proximity effect halos" around tight tolerance features in an IC layout data file. Features and defects outside the halos will not have a significant effect on the printing of the tight tolerance features. During reticle formation, the tight tolerance features and associated halos can be carefully written and inspected to ensure accuracy while the other portions of the reticle can be written/inspected less stringently for efficiency. The halo width can be determined empirically or can be estimated by process modeling. If an electron beam tool is used to write the reticle, a small spot size can be used to expose the tight tolerance features and the halos, whereas a large spot size can be used to expose the remainder of the reticle. A reticle production system can include a computer to read an IC layout data file, identify tight tolerance features, and define proximity effect halos. Tight tolerance features can be individually selected or automatically flagged according to user specifications. A graphical user interface can be provided to enable user input and control. The reticle production system can be coupled to a remote IC layout database through a LAN or a WAN. The reticle production system can be coupled to directly send a reticle data file to a reticle-writing tool.

1 METHOD FOR HIGH YIELD RETICLE FORMATION

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5 FIELD OF THE INVENTION

6 The present invention relates to semiconductor
7 device manufacturing and specifically to the efficient
8 production of reticles for lithographic processes.

9

10 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

11 Lithography masks (or "reticles") are key elements
12 used in the production of integrated circuits (ICs). A
13 portion of an IC layout data file (typically a
14 representation of a physical layer, such as a metal layer
15 or a polysilicon layer, of the final IC) is etched into a
16 thin chrome layer formed over a glass plate to form a
17 reticle. This reticle pattern ("reticle layout") is then
18 exposed onto a layer of photosensitive resist on the
19 surface of the wafer. Finally, the top surface of the
20 wafer is chemically etched away in the areas not covered
21 by the photoresist, thereby transferring the reticle
22 layout onto the wafer. This transference process is
23 known as lithography. The accuracy of the pattern formed
24 on the wafer ("printed layout") significantly affects
25 both process yield and the performance of the final IC.

26 The actual reticle formation process typically
27 involves the steps of exposing the reticle pattern into a
28 layer of resist on a blank reticle, developing the resist
29 pattern (i.e. removing the exposed or unexposed portions
30 of the resist layer), etching the resist pattern into the
31 chrome layer of the reticle, inspecting the chrome
32 pattern, and repairing any defects found in the chrome
33 pattern.

1 While an optical projection (e.g. a laser beam
2 scanner) system can be used to expose the reticle pattern
3 into the resist layer, complex modern layouts are
4 typically written by an electron beam scanner. Two main
5 techniques are used in the exposing step of the electron
6 beam writing process - raster scan and vector scan. In a
7 raster scan system, the output of the scanner is moved in
8 horizontal passes across the entire reticle and shifted
9 an increment downwards after each pass, with the electron
10 beam being applied to regions where the resist is to be
11 exposed. The "spot size" of the electron beam can be set
12 small to enable precise scanning of the reticle layout.
13 However, a larger spot size is desirable to speed up the
14 scanning process. Therefore, accuracy and throughput
15 must be traded off against one another in conventional
16 raster scan writing processes. An example of a raster
17 scan system is the MEBES family of tools (models 4000,
18 4500, 5000, 5500) from Etec Systems, Inc. (a subsidiary
19 of Applied Materials Inc.).

20 In a vector scan system, the electron beam is moved
21 directly to regions that are to be exposed. Most modern
22 vector scan systems employ a shaped spot technique, in
23 which the electron beam is formed into various primitive
24 shapes (rectangles and triangles). The regions to be
25 exposed are decomposed into primitives (rectangles and
26 triangles), and each primitive is then exposed in a
27 single shot by the electron beam, which is shaped to
28 match the primitive being exposed. Vector scanning can
29 be more efficient than raster scanning since the write
30 tool does not have to scan the entire surface of the
31 reticle. Therefore, a sparse layout will be written much
32 faster on a vector scan system than a raster scan system.
33 However, individually targeting the many features in a

1 dense, complex layout can make a vector scan system take
2 longer to write the layout than a raster scan system.
3 And as with raster scanning, beam spot size selection
4 still must balance accuracy and throughput. Examples of
5 vector scan systems include the JBX-6000FS from JEOL,
6 Inc., the Vectorbeam from Leica Lithography Systems,
7 Ltd., and the HL-800, HL-900, and HL-950 tools from
8 Hitachi.

9 After the resist layer has been exposed, the resist
10 pattern is developed. A negative resist is converted by
11 the exposing radiation or electron beam into an insoluble
12 state, and the developing process removes all the non-
13 exposed portions of the resist layer. Exposure of a
14 positive resist transforms the resist from an insoluble
15 state into a soluble state, and the developing process
16 then removes all the exposed portions of the resist
17 layer. The chrome layer of the reticle is then etched
18 through the pattern formed in the resist layer, after
19 which the remaining resist is stripped from the reticle.

20 Next, an inspection tool checks to ensure that the
21 IC layout has been properly written to the reticle. An
22 optical image of the mask layout is checked against the
23 original IC layout data, which may be modified to more
24 accurately represent the expected output. Alternatively,
25 for a reticle comprising multiple identical die layouts,
26 the optical images of the individual die layouts can be
27 compared against each other. Regardless of the specific
28 comparison technique, the inspection sensitivity (i.e.
29 the precision with which inspection is performed) is a
30 key parameter of the inspection process. Because the
31 entire reticle is typically inspected, a high inspection
32 sensitivity can significantly increase the time required
33 complete the process. A lower inspection sensitivity can

1 reduce the inspection time, but may miss defects or
2 deviations in the reticle layout. Therefore,
3 conventional inspection techniques are faced with a
4 tradeoff between inspection sensitivity and efficiency.

5 Finally, defects and deviations detected during the
6 inspection process are corrected. A laser tool (laser
7 zapping or laser assisted deposition) is often used for
8 rapid corrections, while a focused ion beam tool (ion
9 milling or ion-assisted etch or deposition) provides more
10 precise, yet slower, modifications.

11 Fig. 1 shows a technique proposed in an effort to
12 address these mask making and inspection issues as
13 described by Glasser et al., in PCT Patent Application
14 No. PCT/US99/30240, filed December 17, 1999. Fig. 1
15 shows a portion of an original IC layout comprising a
16 diffusion region 110 and a polysilicon region 120. A
17 critical region 130 of polysilicon region 120 is
18 identified where polysilicon region 120 overlies
19 diffusion region 110. This overlap of polysilicon region
20 120 and diffusion region 110 represents a transistor gate
21 to be formed in the final IC device. As a key feature of
22 the final IC, the gate requires a high degree of
23 precision to ensure proper performance of the transistor
24 in the final IC device. However, other features of the
25 IC layout may not require such a high degree of
26 dimensional accuracy. For example, interconnects and
27 contact pads can occupy a wider tolerance band than
28 transistor gates without significantly affecting device
29 performance. Consequently, by flagging critical regions
30 such as region 130, special care can be directed towards
31 those regions during mask making and/or inspection (e.g.
32 very high inspection sensitivity). Less stringent
33 standards (e.g. lower inspection sensitivity) can then be

1 applied to the remaining regions to improve throughput.
2 Therefore, Glasser et al. attempts to efficiently form a
3 high-yield reticle, i.e. a reticle that will produce
4 critical features of the final IC accurately and
5 consistently.

6 However, even though a particular portion of the
7 original IC layout may correspond to a key feature in the
8 final IC device, the actual creation of the key feature
9 typically depends on much more than just the
10 representation of that particular portion of the IC
11 layout in a reticle. The mask-writing processes used to
12 transfer the layout data to a reticle and the
13 lithographic procedures used to print the reticle layout
14 on a wafer are subject to "proximity effects", wherein
15 the final dimensions of the features formed during the
16 transference processes are affected by the presence or
17 absence of neighboring features. For example, during
18 optical lithography, the width of closely spaced lines
19 may be different from the width of isolated lines, even
20 if all the lines have the same width in the reticle.
21 Also, the dimensions and regularity of a printed image
22 can be affected by portions of adjacent features or even
23 by nearby defects.

24 An example of a defect-induced proximity effect is
25 shown in Figs. 2a and 2b. Fig. 2a shows a portion of a
26 polysilicon layer reticle 200 that includes a reticle
27 feature 210. Reticle feature 210 includes a critical
28 region 211 (identified according to the technique of
29 Glasser et al.; i.e. flagging the portion of reticle
30 feature 210 that overlies a diffusion region in the
31 original IC layout) that corresponds to a transistor gate
32 to be formed in the final IC device. Special attention

1 can then be paid to critical region 211 during formation
2 and inspection of reticle 200.

3 However, reticle 200 also includes a defect 212;
4 i.e. an unintended marking in the opaque (chrome) layer
5 of the reticle. Because regions outside of critical
6 region 211 are written and inspected with less care than
7 critical region 211 as taught by Glasser et al., defects
8 like defect 212 are more likely to be created and be
9 undetected in regions outside of critical region 211.
10 Fig. 2b shows portion of a wafer 220 that includes a
11 polysilicon feature 230 that might be produced from a
12 lithography step using reticle 200. Polysilicon feature
13 230 includes an actual gate profile 221 that deviates
14 from a desired gate profile 240. Actual gate profile 221
15 is created because of the proximity effects between
16 reticle feature 210 and reticle defect 212 during
17 lithography. Therefore, despite the identification of
18 the critical region of the original IC layout and
19 subsequent care focused on that critical region during
20 both the reticle making and reticle inspecting steps, the
21 final IC structure is undesirably deformed.

22 In addition, there may be purposely-added features
23 outside of critical region 211 that play an important
24 role in the formation of the final transistor gate. A
25 technique known as optical proximity correction (OPC) has
26 been developed in which features are introduced around
27 (or modifications are made to) a critical layout feature
28 to "precompensate" for predicted deformations during the
29 lithography process. These OPC features and
30 modifications must be reproduced with the same degree of
31 accuracy as the actual layout feature of interest to
32 ensure their proper effect. Similarly, original layout
33 features adjacent to the critical feature must also be

1 accurately formed so that their effects can be reliably
2 taken into account when incorporating OPC features.
3 However, because the critical region only includes the
4 critical feature itself, these influential external
5 features will not receive the same degree of care in
6 construction as the critical feature, often resulting in
7 a less-than-desired final IC accuracy. Accordingly, it
8 is desirable to provide a method for ensuring accurate
9 formation and inspection of reticles that does not allow
10 proximity effects to introduce unexpected deviations in
11 the final IC features.

12

13 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

14 The invention provides a method for optimizing the
15 production of lithography reticles by specifying
16 "proximity effect halos" in an IC layout data file. The
17 proximity effect halos represent the areas around tight
18 tolerance layout features (i.e. layout features that
19 correspond to features in the final IC that must be
20 accurately formed) that can have an effect on the
21 formation or inspection of those tight tolerance layout
22 features. By applying a high degree of care to the
23 proximity effect halos (as well as the tight tolerance
24 layout features surrounded by the proximity effect halo
25 regions) during reticle creation, a reticle capable of
26 providing a high yield lithography process can be
27 created. At the same time, once those areas requiring
28 this enhanced scrutiny are identified, the remainder of
29 the IC layout can be processed using less rigorous
30 standards, thereby reducing the production time and cost
31 of the reticle.

32 The width of the proximity effect halo is defined
33 such that proximity effects on the enclosed tight

1 tolerance layout feature by features and/or defects
2 outside the halo region are below a specified threshold
3 level. In one embodiment of the invention, this width
4 can be determined empirically, through measurements taken
5 from the process(es) in which the IC layout will be used.
6 In another embodiment of the invention, the width can be
7 estimated by modeling the processes for making and using
8 the reticle. For example, in an optical lithography
9 process, proximity effects are proportional to the
10 wavelength of the light used to expose the wafer, and are
11 inversely proportional to the numerical aperture of the
12 tool. Resist and etch effects can further add to the
13 proximity effects, though such processes are less well
14 characterized. Therefore, the width of the halo can be
15 estimated by dividing wavelength by numerical aperture
16 and multiplying the result by a constant to compensate
17 for the resist/etch effects. Also, in an electron beam
18 reticle writing operation, forward scattering and
19 backscattering of the beam during the exposure process
20 can introduce substantial proximity effects. Here too,
21 modeling or data analysis could be used to determine an
22 appropriate proximity effect halo width. In any case,
23 the process in which proximity effects have the greatest
24 range should control the width of the halo.

25 Once defined, the proximity effect halos can then be
26 used to facilitate the production of high-yielding
27 reticles. According to one embodiment of the invention,
28 a raster scan tool can be used to write the reticle.
29 Specifically, a small spot size is used to accurately
30 expose the tight tolerance layout features and the
31 proximity effect halos, whereas a larger spot size is
32 used to efficiently expose the remainder of the reticle.
33 According to another embodiment of the invention, a

1 vector scan tool can be used to write the reticle.
2 Because tight tolerance layout features and associated
3 proximity effect halos can be fractured individually,
4 problems due to oddly shaped primitives can be minimized.

5 According to one embodiment of the invention, a
6 reticle production system includes a computer and a
7 graphical display, wherein the computer reads an IC
8 layout data file, identifies tight tolerance layout
9 features, and defines proximity effect halos around the
10 tight tolerance layout features. According to an aspect
11 of the invention, the key features can be manually
12 identified (i.e. individually selected) by a user.
13 According to another aspect of the invention, the user
14 can specify specific layout features or configurations to
15 be identified as key features. In one embodiment of the
16 invention, a graphical user interface is provided to
17 enable user input and control. In another embodiment of
18 the invention, the reticle production system can be
19 coupled to receive the IC layout data file from a remote
20 database through a local area network or a wide area
21 network. According to yet another embodiment of the
22 invention, the reticle production system can be coupled
23 to a reticle writing tool, which receives a reticle data
24 file that includes the proximity effect halo data from
25 the computer.

26

27 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

28 Fig. 1 shows a sample portion of an IC layout having
29 a critical region flagged in accordance with the prior
30 art.

31 Figs. 2a and 2b illustrate a proximity effect caused
32 by a reticle defect.

1 Fig. 3 shows a sample proximity effect halo in
2 accordance with the invention.

3 Fig. 4a shows a flow diagram of a reticle creation
4 process in accordance with an embodiment of the
5 invention.

6 Fig. 4b shows a flow diagram of a reticle writing
7 operation using a raster scan tool in accordance with an
8 embodiment of the invention.

9 Fig. 4c shows a flow diagram of a reticle writing
10 operation using a vector scan tool in accordance with an
11 embodiment of the invention.

12 Fig. 5 illustrates a raster scan reticle writing
13 process in accordance with an embodiment of the
14 invention.

15 Fig. 6 shows a diagram of a reticle layout
16 processing system in accordance with an embodiment of the
17 present invention.

18

19 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

20 Fig. 3 provides an example of a "tight tolerance
21 feature" that could require special attention during
22 reticle writing to ensure proper device formation during
23 lithography. Fig. 3 shows sample layout features 310 and
24 320 that can commonly be found in a conventional IC
25 layout design. As depicted in Fig. 3, layout feature 320
26 represents a feature to be formed in a polysilicon layer
27 of an IC, over a diffusion region represented by layout
28 feature 310. Layout features 310 and 320 therefore
29 designate a transistor to be formed in the IC, the gate
30 of the transistor being defined where layout feature 320
31 overlies layout feature 310. Accordingly, layout feature
32 320 includes a tight tolerance feature 321 that
33 corresponds to this overlap region. Tight tolerance

1 feature 321 must be accurately formed in the final IC
2 since the gate of a transistor is so critical to device
3 performance.

4

5 Proximity Effect Halo

6 To ensure this accurate formation of tight tolerance
7 feature 321, a proximity effect halo 331 is designated
8 around tight tolerance feature 321. Proximity effect
9 halo 331 extends a distance d from each edge of tight
10 tolerance feature 321. Distance d represents a
11 "proximity effect range" and is selected so that any
12 features outside proximity effect halo 331 will have a
13 negligible effect on tight tolerance feature 321 during
14 reticle formation or wafer patterning. Note that the
15 outer perimeter of proximity effect halo 331 could have
16 rounded corners to maintain a completely constant spacing
17 from tight tolerance feature 321. However, the square
18 corners shown are simpler to define and process, and do
19 not occupy a significantly larger area of the layout.

20 Together, tight tolerance feature 321 and proximity
21 effect halo 331 form a tight tolerance zone 330.
22 Enhanced care can be directed towards tight tolerance
23 zone 330 during reticle formation to ensure accurate
24 patterning, while standard care can be applied to the
25 less dimension-critical regions outside of tight
26 tolerance zone 330 to improve throughput.

27

28 Proximity Effect Range

29 As described previously, distance d is selected such
30 that any feature or potential defect that could have a
31 significant proximity effect on tight tolerance feature
32 321 will be included in proximity effect halo 331.
33 Proximity effect halo 331 would typically not incorporate

1 all features/defects that could introduce any amount of
2 proximity effect during the printing of tight tolerance
3 feature 321. Such a comprehensive approach would
4 generally be undesirable, because distortions in IC
5 elements below a certain level would not provide much
6 benefit to IC performance, but would require an
7 excessively large proximity effect halo. This approach,
8 in turn, would tend to negate the efficiency benefits
9 derived from applying enhanced care to only those tight
10 tolerance zones as the tight tolerance zones would then
11 be occupying most of the pattern area. Therefore, the
12 proximity effect range should be selected to encompass
13 only those features/potential defects that could have a
14 proximity effect above a certain threshold on the tight
15 tolerance feature.

16 Proximity effects show up during both the wafer
17 patterning process (lithography) and the actual reticle
18 formation processes. Accordingly, the proximity effect
19 range could be derived from the process having the
20 greatest sensitivity to proximity effects, i.e. the
21 process in which threshold proximity effects arise at the
22 greatest distance.

23

24 Wafer Patterning

25 The proximity effect range for wafer patterning is a
26 function of both diffraction effects and process effects.
27 A reticle layout is exposed onto a wafer by a radiation
28 (light) source of a lithography tool. As the exposing
29 light passes through the fine transparent regions of the
30 reticle, diffraction effects between adjacent features
31 lead to distortions in the patterns projected onto the
32 resist layer of the wafer. These diffraction effects are
33 a function of the lithography tool characteristics,

1 including numerical aperture (NA), wavelength of the
2 exposing radiation, and coherence of the exposing
3 radiation, which is in turn a function of the type of
4 illumination used (i.e. on-axis or off-axis
5 illumination).

6 Further distortions can occur as the projected image
7 is subsequently transferred into the wafer surface.
8 These additional deformations are due to process effects
9 that take place during the physical processing of the
10 wafer. For example, because the intensity of the
11 exposing light does not immediately drop to zero at the
12 edges of layout features, but rather decreases at some
13 gradient, the edges of those layout features are
14 partially developed. Depending on the sharpness of the
15 edge intensity gradient and the sensitivity of the
16 resist, this partial edge developing can introduce
17 additional deviations from the desired feature outline.
18 Similarly, when the wafer is dry etched to transfer the
19 pattern in the resist to the wafer surface, the resist
20 layer that remains can be attacked by the etchant ions,
21 thereby leading to further defects. In addition, the
22 high temperatures used in the etch process can cause flow
23 and distortion of the resist pattern.

24 According to one aspect of the invention, the wafer
25 patterning proximity effect range can be derived through
26 empirical data. Because of the complex interactions
27 between the diffraction and process effects as described
28 above, an empirical approach can provide a
29 straightforward means for determining an appropriate
30 proximity effect range. The empirical result can be
31 derived from actual data from the lithography process.
32 According to another aspect of the invention, a formula
33 or model can be used to provide an estimate for the

1 proximity effect range. For example, it is known that
2 diffraction effects are proportional to wavelength over
3 numerical aperture. Therefore, a formula for the
4 approximate proximity effect range could be as follows:

$$5 \quad d = k \cdot \lambda / NA \quad [1]$$

7
8 where d is the proximity effect range, λ is the
9 wavelength of the exposing radiation, NA is the numerical
10 aperture of the tool, and k is a correction constant that
11 adjusts for the coherence of the exposing radiation and
12 the resist and dry etch effects. A typical correction
13 constant for a 365nm wavelength, 0.6 NA process could be
14 $k = 2.5$, which would produce a proximity effect range $d =$
15 $1.5\mu\text{m}$. Changing the wavelength to 248nm would then
16 result in a proximity effect range $d = 1\mu\text{m}$. When using a
17 formula-based approach, a "buffer offset" can be added to
18 the calculated proximity effect range to ensure full
19 coverage of the required area.

20

21 Reticle Writing/Inspecting

22 As indicated previously, it is possible that
23 portions of the reticle formation process could have even
24 more sensitivity to proximity effects than the
25 lithography process. In such a case, the proximity
26 effect range would be based on the affected step(s)
27 within the reticle formation process. Typically, the
28 reticle writing operation can have a high susceptibility
29 to proximity effects. The two main techniques used to
30 write IC layout data to a reticle are optical writing and
31 electron beam (e-beam) writing. In an optical system, a
32 light source is used to expose the IC layout pattern onto
33 the reticle. Accordingly, the proximity effect range for

1 such a process could be affected by diffraction of the
2 light source. As with the wafer patterning procedure,
3 the proximity effect range of an optical reticle writing
4 system could be either determined through empirical data,
5 or calculated using known optical formulae. However,
6 because the reticle is typically written at 4 to 5 times
7 the size of the final printed (wafer) image, the
8 diffraction interactions would typically not be as great
9 as those seen in a lithography step involving the same
10 layout. Examples of optical reticle writing tools
11 include the Core2564, Alta3000, Alta3500, and Alta3700
12 from ETEC Systems, Inc., and the Omega6000 tool from
13 Micronic Laser Systems.

14 In an e-beam system, a focused electron beam (or a
15 shaped beam for vector scan tools) is used to write
16 specified patterns into the resist layer on the reticle
17 surface. Because the beam is not being projected through
18 a pattern, diffraction effects are minimized. However,
19 as the electrons penetrate the resist, they can
20 experience directional deflection as they pass through
21 the resist layer (forward scattering) and when they enter
22 the reticle surface (backscattering). These scattering
23 effects "spread" the area exposed by the e-beam, and can
24 therefore introduce significant proximity effects.

25 Scattering effects are exacerbated as e-beam power
26 is increased to write more complex layout patterns. For
27 example, a 10keV e-beam tool may introduce scattering
28 effects on the order of $2\mu\text{m}$ for a 4-5X reticle. This
29 translates into a 0.4-0.5 μm reticle proximity effect
30 range (at the original layout size, i.e. 1X), which would
31 typically be less than the wafer proximity effect range.
32 However, a 50keV e-beam tool can cause scattering effects
33 on the order of $15\mu\text{m}$ for a 4-5X reticle. These figures

1 translate into a 3-3.75 μ m reticle proximity effect range
2 (1X), which can be significantly larger than the wafer
3 proximity effect range. While modeling or calculation of
4 the scattering effects could be possible, the complexity
5 and probabilistic nature of the interactions could make
6 such calculations difficult. Using empirical data to
7 derive a proximity effect range for an e-beam tool could
8 provide a more efficient and accurate value. Examples of
9 e-beam reticle writing tools include the MEBES tools from
10 ETEC Systems, Inc., the HL800, HL900, and HL950 tools
11 from Hitachi, the JBX-6000FS tool from JEOL, Inc., and
12 the Vectorbeam tool from Leica Lithography Systems, Ltd.

13 Finally, proximity effects also affect the
14 inspection of the patterned reticle as an optical image
15 from the completed reticle is typically used in the
16 inspection process. Because this optical process is
17 typically performed at a 4-5X magnification, inspection
18 proximity effects should be much less pronounced than
19 wafer proximity effects. However, as with lithography or
20 reticle writing, an inspection proximity effect range
21 could be determined either empirically or theoretically,
22 and if larger than the lithography or reticle writing
23 ranges, could be used to define the overall proximity
24 effect range. Examples of reticle inspection tools
25 include the KLA200 and KLA300 series tools from KLA-
26 Tencor, Inc., the Orbot RT800, RT8000, and the ARIS-i
27 tools from Applied Materials, Inc., and the 9MD series
28 tools from Lasertech Corp.

29

30 Reticle Production

31 Once the proximity effect range has been defined, it
32 can be used in the creation of a reticle. Fig. 4a shows
33 a flow diagram of a reticle writing method in accordance

1 with one embodiment of the invention. In step 410, an IC
2 layout data file is read and tight tolerance features are
3 identified. The tight tolerance features can be
4 identified manually by a user selecting individual
5 elements of the layout requiring a high degree of
6 transference precision. Alternatively, in another
7 embodiment, automated means could be used to detect tight
8 tolerance features, for example by detecting specific
9 layout elements (e.g. transistor gates or capacitors) or
10 specific layout feature configurations (e.g. a single-
11 layer configuration, such as an isolated line, or a
12 multi-layer configuration, such as a polysilicon feature
13 over diffusion region). In another embodiment of the
14 invention, the tight tolerance features can be
15 automatically detected by scanning for OPC features (such
16 as assist features or serifs), and then flagging the
17 layout features associated with those OPC features.
18 According to an embodiment of the invention, a design
19 rule checker (DRC) tool could be used to detect tight
20 tolerance features. For example, a gate region such as
21 tight tolerance feature 321 in Fig. 3 can be identified
22 by instructing a DRC tool to perform a Boolean AND
23 operation between the polysilicon layer and the diffusion
24 layer. Examples of DRC tools include ASSURA from Cadence
25 Design Systems, Calibre from Mentor Graphics Corp., and
26 Hercules from Avant!.

27 After identification of the tight tolerance
28 features, proximity effect halos for each of the features
29 are defined in step 420. According to one embodiment of
30 the present invention, a proximity effect halo could be
31 assigned as each tight tolerance feature is identified.
32 As described previously, each proximity effect halo is
33 formed by delineating a width equal to the proximity

1 effect range from each edge of the associated tight
2 tolerance feature. Each tight tolerance feature and
3 associated proximity effect halo can be combined to form
4 a tight tolerance zone. A reticle data file, including
5 the proximity effect halo/tight tolerance zone data, can
6 then be passed to a reticle writing tool.

7 The reticle is written in step 430, wherein the
8 tight tolerance features and regions within the proximity
9 effect halos are written with greater care than the rest
10 of the IC layout. As noted previously, the blank (i.e.
11 unpatterned) reticle can be written either optically or
12 by an e-beam. While an optical tool typically exposes
13 the reticle in a single step, e-beam tools require
14 multiple steps to most effectively make use of the
15 identified tight tolerance zones. Fig. 4b shows a flow
16 diagram of a method for writing a reticle using a raster
17 scan e-beam tool according to an embodiment of the
18 invention. First, the e-beam is set to a small (high-
19 precision) spot size in step 431b. The tight tolerance
20 zones are then rastered in step 432b. Next, the e-beam
21 is set to a large (high-speed) spot size in step 433b.
22 Finally, the remainder of the reticle (non-tight
23 tolerance zones) is rastered in step 434b, thereby
24 completing the exposure process. According to another
25 embodiment of the invention, the tight tolerance zones
26 are rastered after the high-speed scan has exposed the
27 non-tight tolerance regions.

28 An example of an e-beam raster scan process as
29 described in Fig. 4b is depicted in Fig. 5. Fig. 5 shows
30 a portion of an IC layout, comprising a layout feature
31 520 that includes a tight tolerance feature 521. A
32 proximity effect halo 531 has been identified around
33 tight tolerance feature 521 to form a tight tolerance

1 zone 530. An e-beam having a small spot size S1 is used
2 to scan tight tolerance zone 530 along a path P1 to
3 ensure accurate transfer of tight tolerance feature 521
4 and any adjacent areas that could contain features within
5 the proximity effect range of feature 521. An e-beam
6 having a large spot size S2 is used to scan the remaining
7 portions of the IC layout along a path P2 to minimize the
8 total time required for rastering.

9 Instead of using a raster scan method, an e-beam
10 tool could be set up to perform vector scanning. Fig. 4c
11 shows a flow diagram of a method for writing a reticle
12 using a vector scan e-beam tool according to one
13 embodiment of the invention. In a vector scan tool, the
14 e-beam is moved directly to regions of the reticle to be
15 exposed. Each of those regions is fractured into
16 primitive shapes, with each of the primitive shapes being
17 exposed by the similarly shaped e-beam in a single shot.
18 If any of the primitive shapes are very narrow (i.e. very
19 low or very high aspect ratio), the accuracy and quality
20 of the exposure process can be degraded. In conventional
21 vector scan systems, undesirable primitives are difficult
22 to avoid because such a large amount of data is being
23 fractured. However, in step 431c, just the tight
24 tolerance zones are fractured, thereby enabling greater
25 control over the fracturing process to avoid excessively
26 narrow primitives. An example of a fracturing tool is
27 the CATS tool from Transcription Enterprise Inc., a
28 subsidiary of Numerical Technologies, Inc.

29 Because such a limited area is being fractured, the
30 final primitives can be readily adjusted to optimize
31 their shapes. According to an aspect of the invention, a
32 tight tolerance zone including a transistor gate could be
33 fractured for a negative resist process such that the

1 gate (i.e. the tight tolerance feature) is a single
2 primitive. The gate could then be exposed in a single
3 shot for enhanced accuracy. According to another aspect
4 of the invention, a tight tolerance zone including a
5 transistor gate could be fractured for a positive resist
6 process such that the proximity effect halo is decomposed
7 into equal-sized primitives. Since the complement of
8 layout features is typically being exposed in a positive
9 resist process, the use of consistent primitives enhances
10 the regularity of the actual (unexposed) feature.

11 After the fracturing step of 431c, each primitive is
12 exposed in a single shot by a correspondingly shaped beam
13 in step 432c. In step 433c, the remaining data is
14 fractured, and in step 434c, those remaining primitives
15 are exposed. According to another embodiment of the
16 invention, the fracturing of the non-tight tolerance
17 portions of the layout (step 433c) is performed
18 immediately after the fracturing of the tight tolerance
19 zones (step 431c), after which all the primitives are
20 exposed by the electron beam.

21 Returning to Fig. 4a, once the reticle has been
22 written, the exposed pattern is developed in the resist
23 and is subsequently etched into the chrome layer of the
24 reticle in step 440. The finished reticle is then
25 inspected in step 450. According to one embodiment of
26 the invention, the inspection process could be set up to
27 apply high inspection sensitivity to the regions of the
28 reticle corresponding to tight tolerance zones while
29 applying standard (i.e. less stringent) inspection
30 sensitivity to the remainder of the reticle. In this
31 manner, the truly key portions of the reticle are
32 carefully checked to ensure a high yield reticle, whereas
33 the less crucial portions of the reticle are inspected at

1 a more appropriate level, to allow a faster overall
2 inspection process.

3 Finally, any defects or deviations from the desired
4 pattern detected in step 450 are repaired in step 460.
5 According to an embodiment of the invention, a focused
6 ion beam (FIB) tool could be used to perform precise
7 repairs within the tight tolerance zones, while a laser
8 tool could be used to more quickly fix defects in less
9 sensitive regions.

10

11 High Yield Reticle System

12 Fig. 6 shows a diagram of a proximity effect halo
13 processing system 610 according to one embodiment of the
14 invention. System 610 comprises at least one computer
15 614 and a graphical display 612. Computer 614 could
16 comprise a personal computer (PC) running Microsoft™
17 software and/or a workstation such as a Sun™ workstation
18 running the Solaris™ operating system. Graphical display
19 612 allows a user to monitor and control the IC layout
20 processing operations being performed by system 610. For
21 example, graphical display 612 could provide a graphical
22 user interface (GUI) through which a user could input
23 proximity effect range specifications or tight tolerance
24 feature settings.

25 Computer 614 typically includes a processing module
26 to identify tight tolerance features of an IC layout and
27 define proximity effect halos, as described in steps 410
28 and 420, respectively, of the flow diagram shown in Fig.
29 4a. According to an aspect of the invention, the
30 processing module can be implemented in software.
31 According to another aspect of the invention, the
32 processing module can be a hardware element, such as a
33 ROM (random operating memory) chipset.

1 Fig. 6 also shows an IC layout database 620, a
2 reticle writing tool 630, an inspection tool 640, and a
3 repair tool 650, all of which may be located physically
4 apart from system 610. IC layout database 620 can
5 provide a centralized storage area for IC layout data
6 files. Alternatively, the IC layout data files could be
7 stored locally in computer 614, or even in reticle
8 writing tool 630. According to an aspect of the
9 invention, computer 614 may access IC layout database 620
10 for files to be processed for reticle writing through a
11 local area network (LAN). In another embodiment of the
12 invention, IC layout database 620 may be accessed through
13 a wide area network (WAN), such as the Internet. System
14 610 sends the reticle data file (including proximity
15 effect halo information) to reticle writing tool 630,
16 which patterns the reticle and sends it to inspection
17 tool 640. Inspection tool 640 is also provided with the
18 modified layout data file so that the inspection process
19 can be optimized. Finally, the inspected reticle and its
20 associated defect data are provided to repair tool 650,
21 along with the modified layout data file. Repair tool
22 650 can then perform defect repair based on the tight
23 tolerance zones defined in the modified layout data file.
24 According to an aspect of the invention, repair tool 650
25 could be set to perform high-precision repairs on defects
26 within the tight tolerance zones and low-precision
27 repairs on all other defects. According to another
28 embodiment of the invention, repair tool 650 could be
29 replaced with two different repair tools, a focused ion
30 beam tool for tight tolerance zone defects, and a laser
31 tool for all other defects. As with IC layout database
32 620, reticle writing tool 630, inspection tool 640, and
33 repair tool 650 may be connected to computer 614 through

1 a LAN or a WAN, or may communicate through a direct (i.e.
2 non-networked) connection.

3

4 Conclusion

5 Thus, the present invention ensures efficient
6 production of high yield reticles. Specifically, by
7 identifying IC layout features requiring a high degree of
8 accuracy, and then identifying the adjacent regions that
9 could affect the formation of those features, the
10 portions of a reticle that strongly affect the
11 performance of the final IC can be precisely formed and
12 inspected. At the same time, less stringent controls can
13 be placed on the formation and inspection of the
14 remaining areas, thereby minimizing the time required to
15 form the finished reticle.

16 The above disclosure is not intended to be limiting.
17 Numerous modifications and variations of the invention
18 will be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art.
19 For example, while tight tolerance feature 321 is shown
20 as representing a transistor gate in Fig. 3, any layout
21 feature(s) could be specified as the tight tolerance
22 feature(s). Similarly, while tight tolerance feature 321
23 and tight tolerance zone 330 in Fig. 3 are shown as
24 having substantially rectangular outlines, a tight
25 tolerance feature could have any outline and its
26 associated tight tolerance zone would simply parallel
27 that outline. Also, while system 610 in Fig. 6 is
28 depicted as a computer 614, system 610 could also be a
29 client for a remote server that does the actual layout
30 processing. In addition, while system 610 is shown as
31 being separate from reticle writing tool 630, system 610
32 could be incorporated directly in tool 630. Therefore,
33 the invention is limited only by the following claims.

1 CLAIMS

2

3 1. A method for creating a lithography reticle
4 from an integrated circuit (IC) layout data file, the
5 method comprising the steps of:

6 identifying a plurality of layout features in
7 the IC layout data file; and

8 defining a plurality of halo regions, each of
9 the plurality of halo regions having an inner
10 perimeter and an outer perimeter, the inner
11 perimeter of each of the plurality of halo regions
12 being defined by the outer perimeter of a
13 corresponding one of the plurality of layout
14 features, and the inner perimeter and the outer
15 perimeter of each of the plurality of halo regions
16 being substantially parallel.

17

18 2. The method of Claim 1, wherein each of the
19 plurality of halo regions has a substantially constant
20 width.

21

22 3. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of
23 identifying the plurality of layout features comprises
24 manually selecting features within the IC layout data
25 file.

26

27 4. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of
28 identifying the plurality of layout features comprises
29 the steps of:

30 specifying a layout element;

31 scanning the IC layout data file; and

32 flagging locations in the IC layout data file
33 matching the layout element.

1

2 5. The method of Claim 4, wherein the layout
3 element comprises a transistor gate.

4

5 6. The method of Claim 4, wherein the layout
6 element comprises a capacitor.

7

8 7. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of
9 identifying the plurality of layout features comprises
10 the steps of:

11 specifying a plurality of layout elements;
12 scanning the IC layout data file; and
13 flagging locations in the IC layout data file
14 matching one of the plurality of layout features.

15

16 8. The method of Claim 1, wherein the IC layout
17 data file comprises a plurality of layer layouts, each of
18 the layer layouts corresponding to a single process layer
19 in a completed IC, the step of identifying the plurality
20 of layout features comprising the steps of:

21 specifying a layout feature configuration;
22 scanning a first one of the plurality of layer
23 layouts; and
24 flagging locations in the first one of the
25 plurality of layer layouts matching the layout
26 feature configuration.

27

28 9. The method of Claim 8, wherein the layout
29 feature configuration comprises a single-layer
30 configuration.

31

1 10. The method of Claim 8, wherein the layout
2 feature configuration comprises a multi-layer
3 configuration.
4

5 11. The method of Claim 10, wherein the first one
6 of the plurality of layer layouts corresponds to a
7 polysilicon layer of the completed IC, and wherein the
8 multi-layer configuration comprises a feature in the
9 first one of the plurality of layer layouts formed over
10 any feature in a second one of the plurality of layer
11 layouts, the second one of the plurality of layer layouts
12 corresponding to a diffusion layer of the completed IC.
13

14 12. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of
15 identifying the plurality of layout features comprises
16 the steps of:

17 scanning the IC layout data file;
18 identifying optical proximity correction (OPC)
19 features; and
20 flagging locations in the IC layout data file
21 associated with the OPC features.
22

23 13. The method of Claim 2, wherein the step of
24 defining a plurality of halo regions comprises the steps
25 of:

26 defining the inner perimeter of each of the
27 plurality of halo regions;
28 specifying a parallel line at the substantially
29 constant width from each edge of the inner perimeter
30 of each of the plurality of halo regions; and
31 connecting the parallel lines around each inner
32 perimeter of each of the plurality of halo regions.
33

1 14. The method of Claim 13, wherein the
2 substantially constant width is defined to be a distance
3 at which proximity effects in a lithography process using
4 the lithography reticle are less than a specified
5 threshold level.

6
7 15. The method of Claim 13, wherein the
8 substantially constant width is defined to be a distance
9 at which proximity effects in a reticle formation process
10 for the lithography reticle are less than a specified
11 threshold level.

12
13 16. The method of Claim 13, wherein the
14 substantially constant width is defined to be the greater
15 of a first distance, at which proximity effects in a
16 lithography process using the lithography reticle are
17 less than a specified threshold level, and a second
18 distance, at which proximity effects in a reticle
19 formation process for the lithography reticle are less
20 than the specified threshold level.

21
22 17. The method of Claim 14, wherein the distance is
23 determined empirically using measured proximity effect
24 data.

25
26 18. The method of Claim 14, wherein the lithography
27 reticle is used in a lithography process using an
28 exposing radiation of a substantially constant wavelength
29 and having a substantially constant numerical aperture
30 (NA), the distance being estimated by dividing the
31 substantially constant wavelength by the NA and
32 multiplying the result by a constant correction factor to
33 compensate for resist and etch effects.

1
2 19. The method of Claim 18, wherein the distance is
3 approximately equal to 1.5 microns when the substantially
4 constant wavelength is 365 nm and the NA is 0.6.

5
6 20. The method of Claim 18, wherein the distance is
7 approximately equal to 1.0 microns when the substantially
8 constant wavelength is 248 nm and the NA is 0.6.

9
10 21. The method of Claim 15, wherein the distance is
11 between 3.0 μ m and 3.75 μ m for a 50keV electron beam
12 reticle writing process.

13
14 22. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the
15 steps of:
16 writing the IC layout data file to the
17 lithography reticle;
18 inspecting the lithography reticle; and
19 repairing the lithography reticle.

20
21 23. The method of Claim 22, wherein the step of
22 writing is performed using a raster scan tool, the raster
23 scan tool having a first beam spot size and a second beam
24 spot size, the first beam spot size being smaller than
25 the second beam spot size, wherein the step of writing
26 comprises the steps of:

27 rastering the portions of the lithography
28 reticle corresponding to the plurality of layout
29 features and the plurality of halo regions using the
30 first beam spot size; and
31 rastering the remainder of the lithography
32 reticle using the second beam spot size.

33

1 24. The method of Claim 22, wherein the step of
2 writing is performed using a vector scan tool, the vector
3 scan tool being capable of generating an adjustable
4 electron beam, wherein the step of writing comprises the
5 steps of:

6 combining each of the plurality of halo regions
7 with the corresponding one of the plurality of
8 layout features to define a plurality of tight
9 tolerance zones;

10 fracturing each of the plurality of tight
11 tolerance zones into a first plurality of
12 primitives, wherein each of the first plurality of
13 primitives comprising one of a plurality of shapes
14 that can be formed by the adjustable electron beam;

15 fracturing the remainder of the IC layout data
16 file into a second plurality of primitives, each of
17 the second plurality of primitives comprising one of
18 the plurality of shapes that can be formed by the
19 adjustable electron beam;

20 exposing each of the first plurality of
21 primitives;

22 and

23 exposing each of the second plurality of
24 primitives.

25

26 25. The method of Claim 24, wherein each of the
27 first plurality of primitives has a width greater than a
28 base width, the base width being sized to be larger than
29 the minimum beam width of the vector scan tool.

30

31 26. The method of Claim 24, wherein a negative
32 resist process is being used, the step of fracturing each
33 of the plurality of tight tolerance zones comprising the

1 step of forming a single primitive around each of the
2 plurality of layout features.

3

4 27. The method of Claim 24, wherein a positive
5 resist process is being used, the step of fracturing each
6 of the plurality of tight tolerance zones comprising
7 forming a set of primitives of substantially similar
8 shape around each of the plurality of layout features.

9

10 28. The method of Claim 22, wherein the step of
11 inspecting comprises the steps of:

12 inspecting portions of the lithography reticle
13 corresponding to the plurality of halo regions and
14 the plurality of layout features according to a
15 first level of scrutiny; and

16 inspecting portions of the lithography reticle
17 not corresponding to the plurality of halo regions
18 and the plurality of layout features according to a
19 second level of scrutiny, the first level of
20 scrutiny being more rigorous than the second level
21 of scrutiny.

22

23 29. The method of Claim 22, wherein the step of
24 inspecting detects a first plurality of defects within
25 the plurality of halo regions and the plurality of layout
26 features and a second plurality of defects not within the
27 plurality of halo regions and the plurality of layout
28 features, the step of repairing comprising the steps of:

29 repairing the first plurality of defects using
30 a first repair process; and

31 repairing the second plurality of defects using
32 a second repair process, wherein the first repair
33 process is more accurate than the second repair

1 process, and wherein the second repair process is
2 faster than the first repair process.

3

4 30. The method of Claim 29, wherein the first
5 repair process comprises a focused ion beam repair
6 process, and wherein the second repair process comprises
7 a laser repair process.

8

9 31. A system for creating a reticle data file from
10 an integrated circuit (IC) layout data file, the system
11 comprising:

12 a processing module, the processing module
13 being configured to read the IC layout data file,
14 identify a plurality of specified layout features in
15 the IC layout data file, and define a halo region
16 having a substantially constant width around each of
17 the plurality of specified layout features; and

18 a graphical display, the graphical display
19 being configured to provide a graphical user
20 interface (GUI) to allow user input and control of
21 the processing module.

22

23 32. The system of Claim 31, wherein the processing
24 module comprises a personal computer.

25

26 33. The system of Claim 31, wherein the processing
27 module is coupled to receive the IC layout data file from
28 a remote database through a local area network.

29

30 34. The system of Claim 33, wherein the processing
31 module is coupled to receive the IC layout data file from
32 a remote database through a wide area network.

33

1 35. The system of Claim 33, wherein the processing
2 module is directly connected to a reticle writing tool.

3

4 36. The system of Claim 33, wherein the processing
5 module is configured to send the reticle data file to a
6 reticle writing tool through a local area network.

7

8 37. The system of Claim 33, wherein the processing
9 module is configured to send the reticle data file to a
10 reticle writing tool through a wide area network.

11

12 38. A reticle for transferring an integrated
13 circuit layout to a wafer, the reticle comprising:

14 at least one layout feature having an area
15 designated a tight tolerance feature and an area
16 designated as a proximity effect halo.

AMENDED CLAIMS

[received by the International Bureau on 21 November 2001 (21.11.01);
original claims 1, 3-4, 7-8, 12-16, 22-24, 26-29; original claims 31-37 cancelled;
new claims 39-53 added; remaining claims unchanged (11 pages)]

1. (Amended) A method for creating a lithography reticle from an integrated circuit (IC) layout data file, the method comprising:

identifying a plurality of layout features in the IC layout data file;

defining a plurality of halo regions, each of the plurality of halo regions having an inner perimeter and an outer perimeter, the inner perimeter of each of the plurality of halo regions being defined by the outer perimeter of a corresponding one of the plurality of layout features, and the inner perimeter and the outer perimeter of each of the plurality of halo regions being substantially parallel; and

performing an operation using a first set of parameters and a second set of parameters, the first set of parameters being associated with the plurality of critical layout features and the plurality of halo regions, the second set of parameters being associated with the IC layout data file not including the plurality of critical layout features and the plurality of halo regions, the first set of parameters being different from the second set of parameters.

2. The method of Claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of halo regions has a substantially constant width.

3. (Amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein identifying the plurality of critical layout features comprises manually selecting features within the IC layout data file.

4. (Amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein identifying the plurality of critical layout features comprises:

- specifying a layout element;
- scanning the IC layout data file; and
- flagging locations in the IC layout data file matching the layout element.

5. The method of Claim 4, wherein the layout element comprises a transistor gate.

6. The method of Claim 4, wherein the layout element comprises a capacitor.

7. (Amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein identifying the plurality of critical layout features comprises:

- specifying a plurality of layout elements;
- scanning the IC layout data file; and
- flagging locations in the IC layout data file matching one of the plurality of layout elements.

8. (Amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein the IC layout data file comprises a plurality of layer layouts, each of the layer layouts corresponding to a single process layer in a completed IC, wherein identifying the plurality of critical layout features comprises:

- specifying a layout feature configuration;
- scanning a first one of the plurality of layer layouts; and

flagging locations in the first one of the plurality of layer layouts matching the layout feature configuration.

9. The method of Claim 8, wherein the layout feature configuration comprises a single-layer configuration.

10. The method of Claim 8, wherein the layout feature configuration comprises a multi-layer configuration.

11. The method of Claim 10, wherein the first one of the plurality of layer layouts corresponds to a polysilicon layer of the completed IC, and wherein the multi-layer configuration comprises a feature in the first one of the plurality of layer layouts formed over any feature in a second one of the plurality of layer layouts, the second one of the plurality of layer layouts corresponding to a diffusion layer of the completed IC.

12. (Amended) The method of Claim 1, wherein identifying the plurality of critical layout features comprises:

- scanning the IC layout data file;
- identifying optical proximity correction (OPC) features; and
- flagging locations in the IC layout data file associated with the OPC features.

13. (Amended) The method of Claim 2, wherein defining a plurality of halo regions comprises:

defining the inner perimeter of each of the plurality of halo regions;
specifying a parallel line at the substantially constant width from each edge of the inner perimeter of each of the plurality of halo regions; and
connecting the parallel lines around each inner perimeter of each of the plurality of halo regions.

14. (Amended) The method of Claim 13, wherein the substantially constant width is defined to be a distance at which proximity effects in a lithography process associated with the IC layout are less than a specified threshold level.

15. (Amended) The method of Claim 13, wherein the substantially constant width is defined to be a distance at which proximity effects in a reticle formation process associated with the IC layout are less than a specified threshold level.

16. (Amended) The method of Claim 13, wherein the substantially constant width is defined to be the greater of a first distance, at which proximity effects in a lithography process associated with the IC layout are less than a specified threshold level, and a second distance, at which proximity effects in a reticle formation process associated with the IC layout are less than the specified threshold level.

17. The method of Claim 14, wherein the distance is determined empirically using measured proximity effect data.

18. The method of Claim 14, wherein the lithography reticle is used in a lithography process using an exposing radiation of a substantially constant wavelength and having a substantially constant numerical aperture (NA), the distance being estimated by dividing the substantially constant wavelength by the NA and multiplying the result by a constant correction factor to compensate for resist and etch effects.

19. The method of Claim 18, wherein the distance is approximately equal to 1.5 microns when the substantially constant wavelength is 365 nm and the NA is 0.6.

20. The method of Claim 18, wherein the distance is approximately equal to 1.0 microns when the substantially constant wavelength is 248 nm and the NA is 0.6.

21. The method of Claim 15, wherein the distance is between $3.0\mu\text{m}$ and $3.75\mu\text{m}$ for a 50keV electron beam reticle writing process.

22. (Amended) The method of Claim 1 wherein the operation comprises writing the IC layout data file to a lithography reticle.

23. (Amended) The method of Claim 22, wherein writing the IC layout data file to the lithography reticle is performed using a raster scan tool, the raster scan tool having a first beam spot size and a second beam spot size, the first beam spot size being smaller than the second beam spot size, wherein the

first set of parameters comprises the first beam spot size and the second set of parameters comprises the second beam spot size, and wherein writing the IC layout data file to the lithography reticle comprises:

rastering the portions of the lithography reticle corresponding to the plurality of critical layout features and the plurality of halo regions using the first beam spot size; and

rastering the remainder of the lithography reticle using the second beam spot size.

24. (Amended) The method of Claim 22, wherein writing the IC layout data file to the lithography reticle is performed using a vector scan tool, the vector scan tool being capable of generating an adjustable electron beam, wherein writing the IC layout data file to the lithography reticle comprises:

combining each of the plurality of halo regions with the corresponding one of the plurality of critical layout features to define a plurality of tight tolerance zones;

fracturing each of the plurality of tight tolerance zones into a first plurality of primitives according to the first set of parameters, wherein each of the first plurality of primitives comprising one of a plurality of shapes that can be formed by the adjustable electron beam;

fracturing the remainder of the IC layout data file into a second plurality of primitives according to the second set of parameters, each of the second plurality of primitives comprising one of the plurality of shapes that can be formed by the adjustable electron beam;

exposing each of the first plurality of
primitives;
and
exposing each of the second plurality of
primitives.

25. The method of Claim 24, wherein each of the first plurality of primitives has a width greater than a base width, the base width being sized to be larger than the minimum beam width of the vector scan tool.

26. (Amended) The method of Claim 24, wherein a negative resist process is used, and wherein fracturing each of the plurality of tight tolerance zones comprises forming a single primitive around each of the plurality of critical layout features.

27. (Amended) The method of Claim 24, wherein a positive resist process is used, and wherein fracturing each of the plurality of tight tolerance zones comprises forming a set of primitives of substantially similar shape around each of the plurality of critical layout features.

28. (Amended) The method of Claim 22, wherein the operation comprises inspecting a lithography reticle, wherein inspecting the lithography reticle comprises:

inspecting portions of the lithography reticle corresponding to the plurality of halo regions and the plurality of critical layout features according to a first level of scrutiny, wherein the first set of parameters comprises the first level of scrutiny; and

inspecting portions of the lithography reticle not corresponding to the plurality of halo regions and the plurality of critical layout features according to a second level of scrutiny, wherein the second set of parameters comprises the second level of scrutiny, the first level of scrutiny being more rigorous than the second level of scrutiny.

29. (Amended) The method of Claim 22, wherein the operation comprises repairing a lithography reticle, wherein repairing the lithography reticle comprises:

repairing a first plurality of defects within the plurality of halo regions and the plurality of critical layout features using a first repair process, wherein the first set of parameters comprises the first repair process; and

repairing a second plurality of defects not within the plurality of halo regions and the plurality of critical layout features using a second repair process, wherein the second set of parameters comprises the second repair process, the first repair process being more accurate than the second repair process, and the second repair process being faster than the first repair process.

30. The method of Claim 29, wherein the first repair process comprises a focused ion beam repair process, and wherein the second repair process comprises a laser repair process.

(CLAIMS 31 - 37 ARE CANCELLED.)

38. A reticle for transferring an integrated circuit layout to a wafer, the reticle comprising: at least one layout feature having an area designated as a tight tolerance feature and an area designated as a proximity effect halo.

(CLAIMS 39 - 53 ARE NEWLY ADDED)

39. A system for using an IC layout data file, the system comprising:

a processing module configured to read the IC layout data file, identify a plurality of specified layout features in the IC layout data file, and define a halo region around each of the plurality of specified layout features; and

an operating tool configured to perform a first operation associated with the plurality of specified layout features and the halo regions around each of the plurality of specified layout features, and perform a second operation associated with the IC layout data file not including the plurality of specified layout features and the halo regions around each of the plurality of specified layout features, wherein the first operation is different from the second operation.

40. The system of Claim 39, wherein the halo region around each of the plurality of specified layout features comprises a substantially constant width.

41. The system of Claim 40, wherein the substantially constant width is defined to be a distance at which proximity effects in a lithography process

associated with the IC layout data file are less than a specified threshold level.

42. The system of Claim 40, wherein the substantially constant width is defined to be a distance at which proximity effects in a reticle formation process associated with the IC layout data file are less than a specified threshold level.

43. The method of Claim 40, wherein the substantially constant width is defined to be the greater of a first distance, at which proximity effects in a lithography process associated with the IC layout data file are less than a specified threshold level, and a second distance, at which proximity effects in a reticle formation process associated with the IC layout data file are less than the specified threshold level.

44. The system of Claim 39, wherein the plurality of specified layout features comprises a plurality of optical proximity correction features.

45. The system of Claim 39, wherein the processing module further comprises a graphical display, the graphical display being configured to provide a graphical user interface (GUI) to allow user input and control of the processing module.

46. The system of Claim 39, wherein the processing module comprises a personal computer.

47. The system of Claim 39, wherein the processing module is coupled to receive the IC layout data file from a remote database through a local area network.

48. The system of Claim 39, wherein the processing module is coupled to receive the IC layout data file from a remote database through a wide area network.

49. The system of Claim 39, wherein the operating tool comprises a reticle writing tool.

50. The system of Claim 49, wherein the processing module is configured to send a reticle data file to the reticle writing tool through a local area network.

51. The system of Claim 49, wherein the processing module is configured to send a reticle data file to the reticle writing tool through a wide area network.

52. The system of Claim 39, wherein the operating tool comprises a reticle inspection tool.

53. The system of Claim 39, wherein the operating tool comprises a reticle repair tool.

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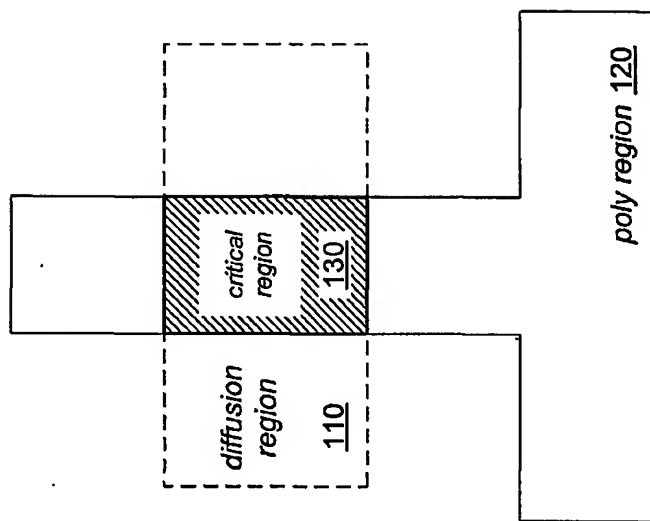


Fig. 1
(PRIOR ART)

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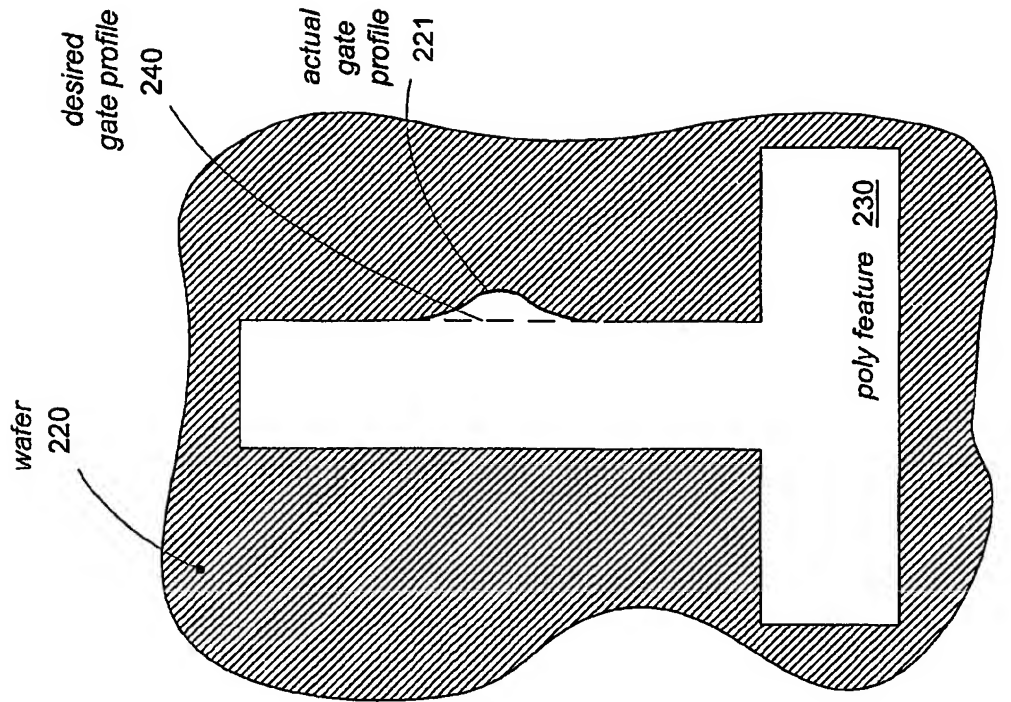


Fig. 2b

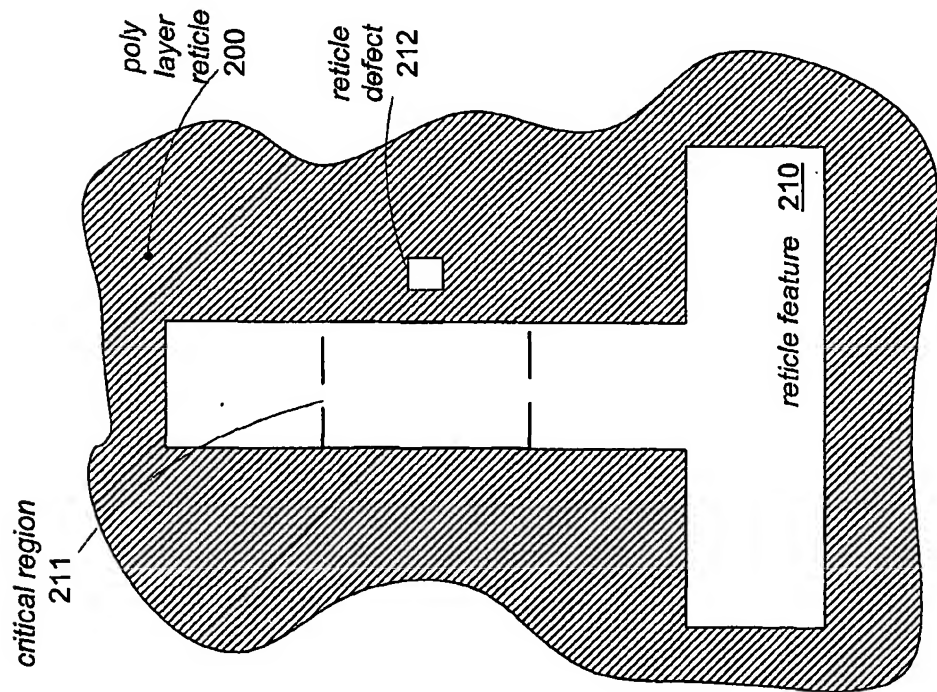


Fig. 2a

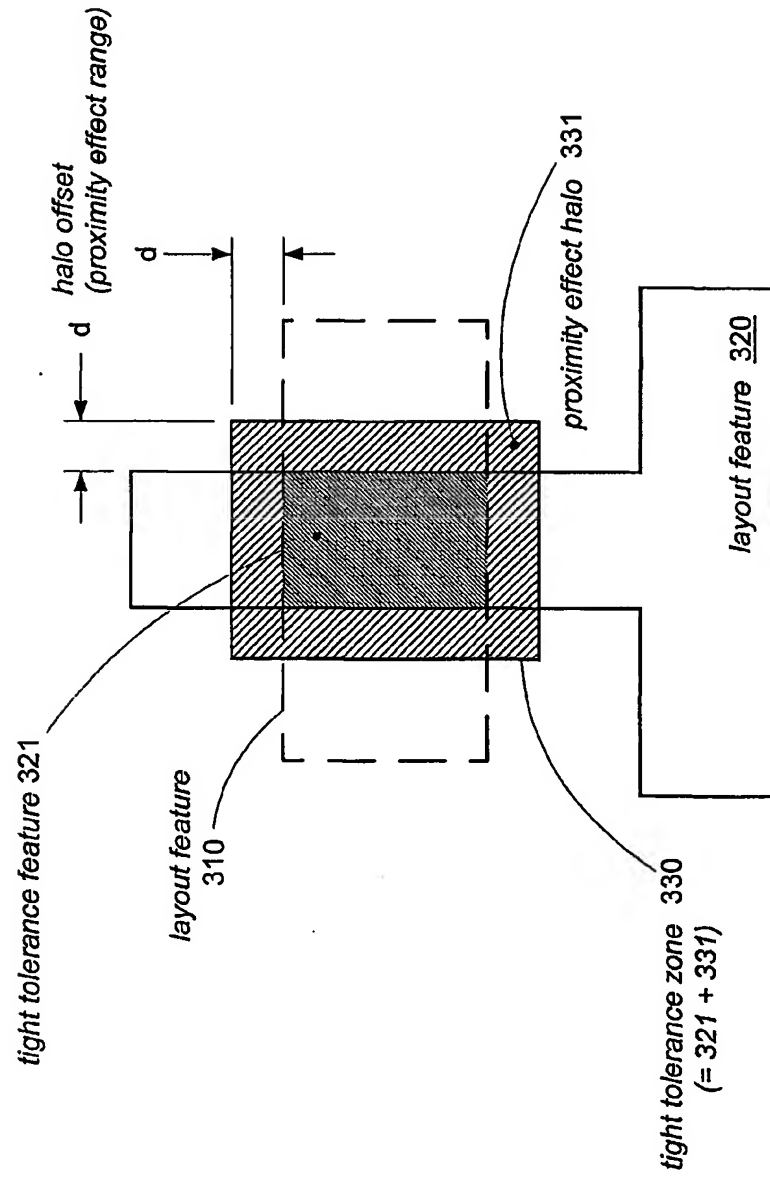


Fig. 3

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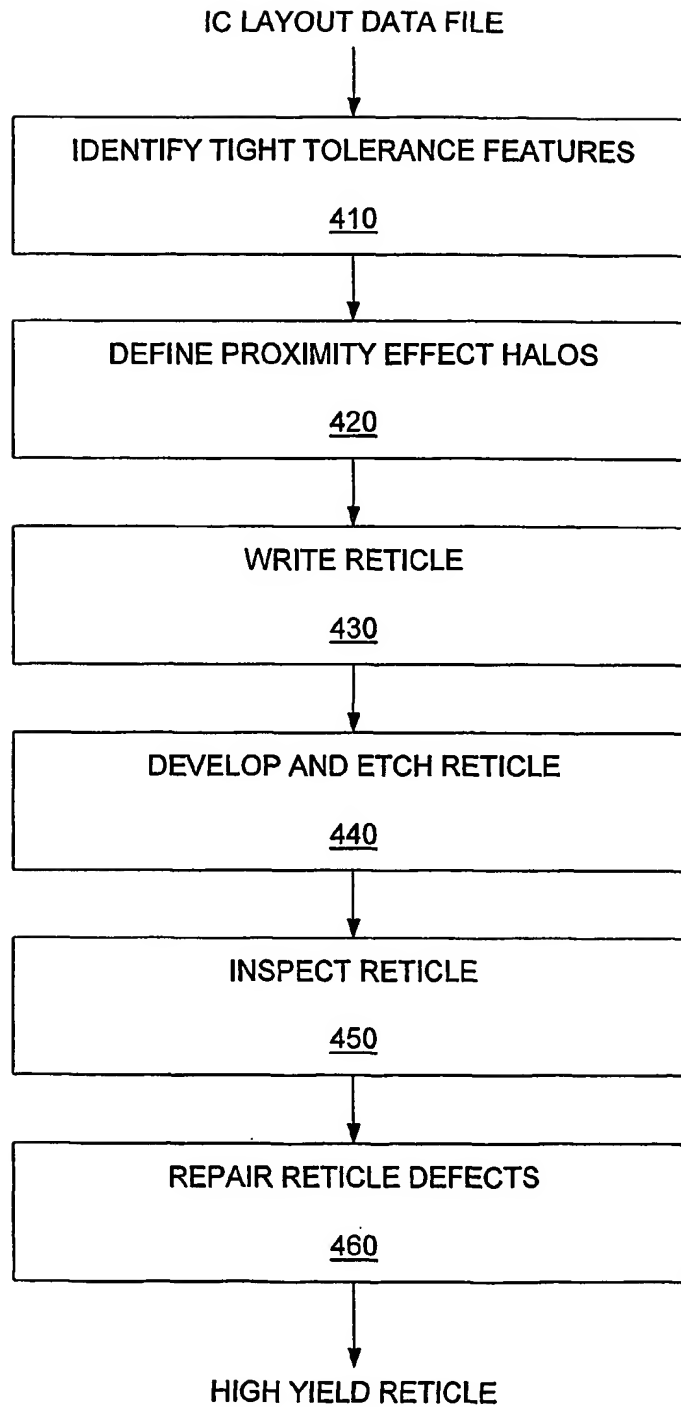


Fig. 4a

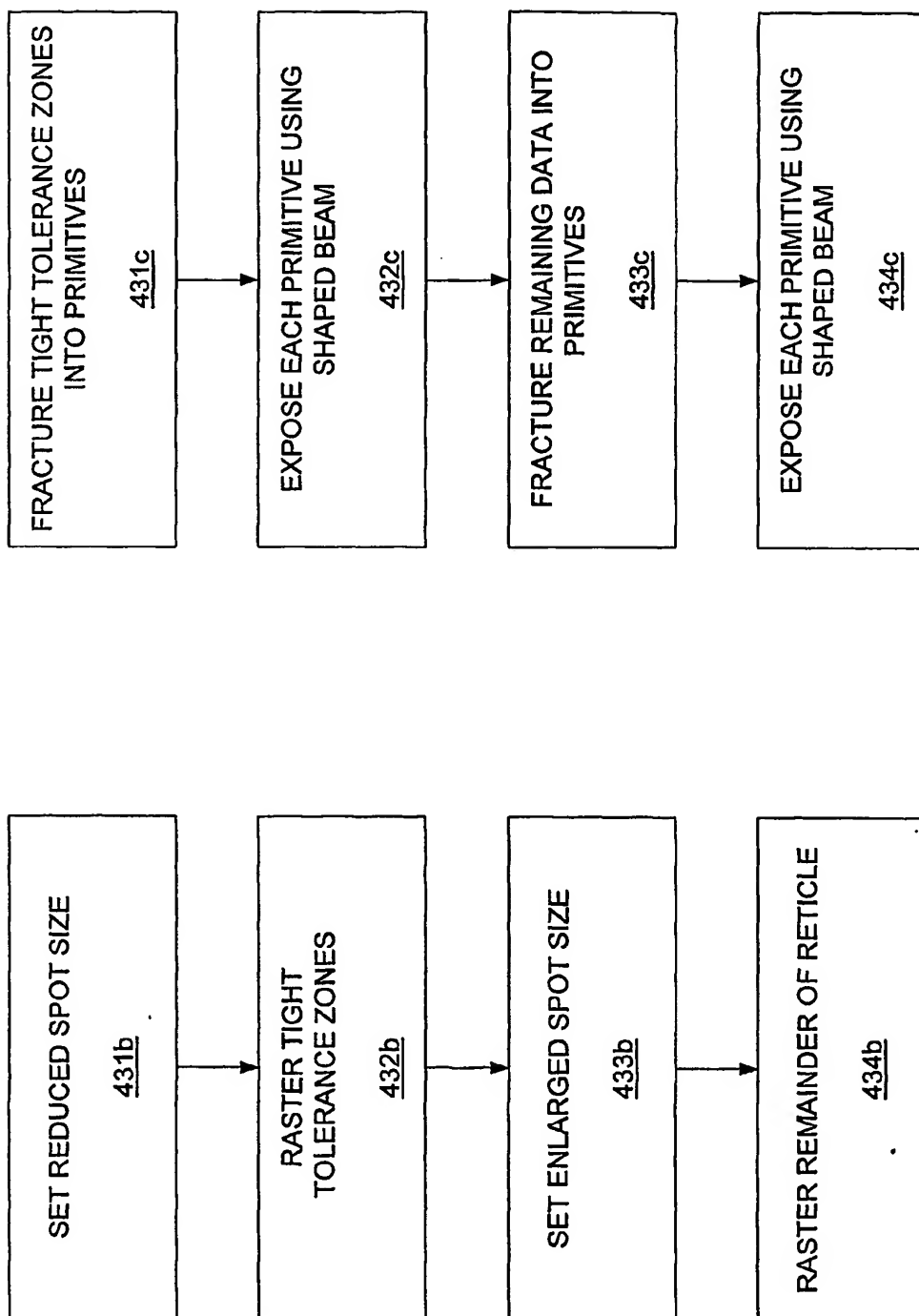


Fig. 4b

Fig. 4c

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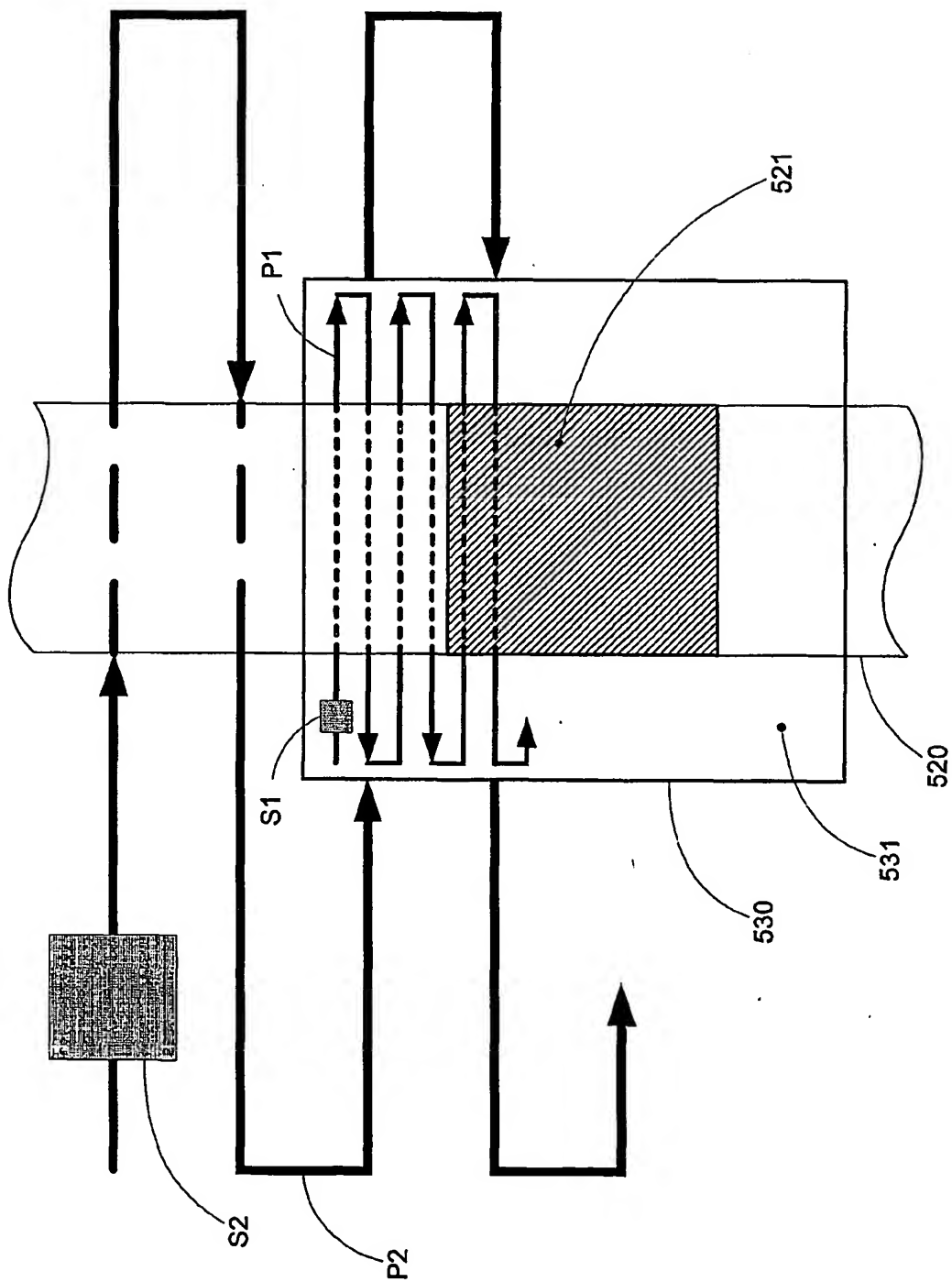


Fig. 5

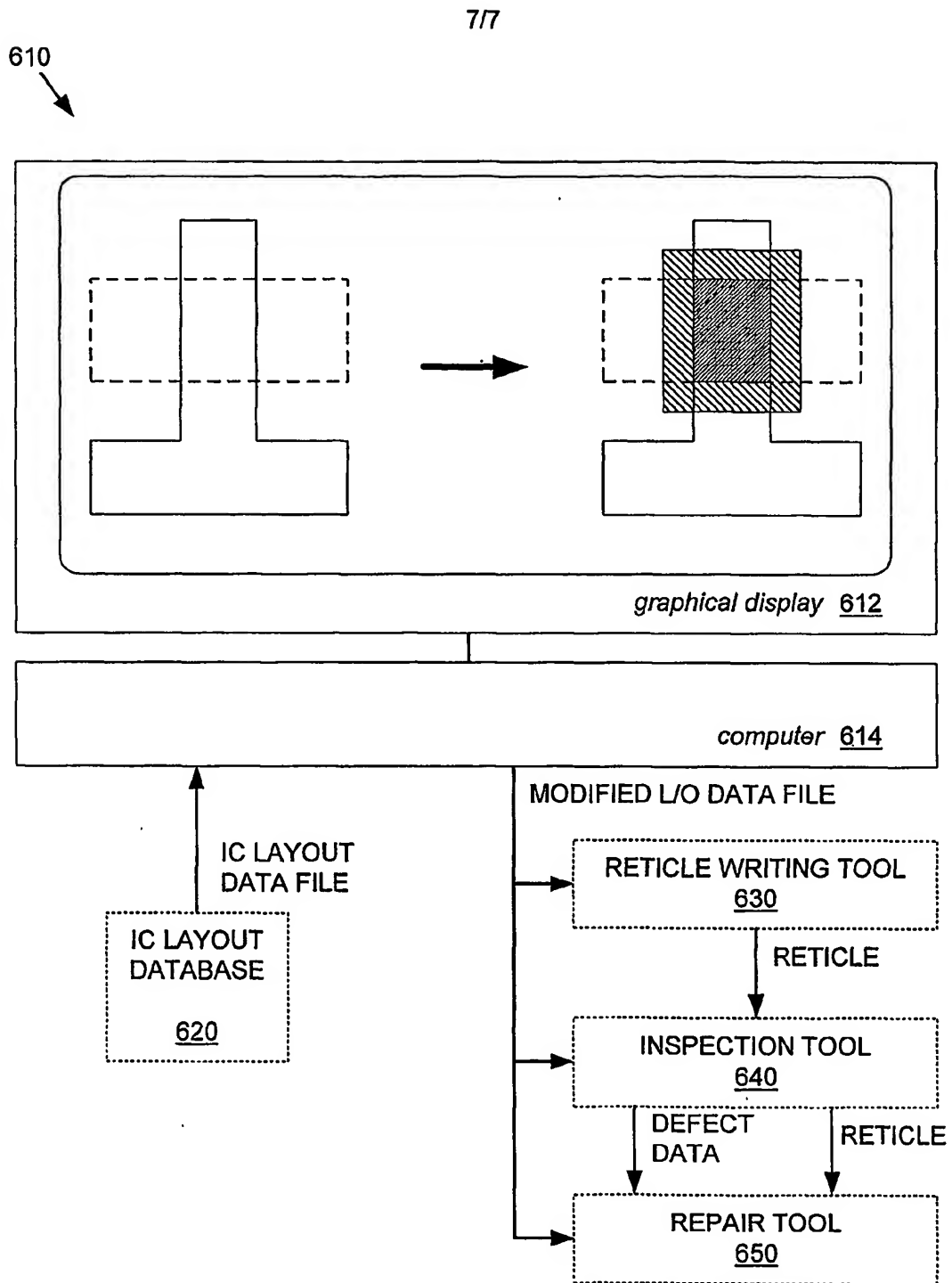


Fig. 6

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Inventor's Application No
PCT/US 00/35653

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
IPC 7 G03F1/14 G03F7/20 H01J37/302

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
IPC 7 G03F H01J

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the International search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

EPO-Internal, WPI Data, INSPEC, IBM-TDB, COMPENDEX, PAJ

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	GB 2 344 436 A (NIPPON ELECTRIC CO) 7 June 2000 (2000-06-07) the whole document	1-8, 10-38
X	US 4 895 780 A (NISSAN-COHEN YOAV ET AL) 23 January 1990 (1990-01-23) the whole document	1-9, 11-38
A	WO 00 36525 A (KLA TENCOR CORP) 22 June 2000 (2000-06-22)	
A	US 4 692 579 A (SAITOU NORIO ET AL) 8 September 1987 (1987-09-08)	



Further documents are listed in the continuation of box C.



Patent family members are listed in annex.

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Date of the actual completion of the International search

21 September 2001

Date of mailing of the International search report

01/10/2001

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on parent family members

Int. Patent Application No

PCT/US 00/35653

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